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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the story of a university/public school collaborative program that in June 1991 was awarded the American Association of Higher Education's Presidents' Forum Award for Exemplary Work in Accelerating Minority Achievement. The Louisiana program was implemented by the College of Education of the University of New Orleans and two elementary schools of the New Orleans Public Schools to enhance prospective teachers' abilities to teach reading and language arts to at-risk, urban students and to introduce the prospective teachers to an instructional context similar to one in which they would most likely be employed. Two mornings a week, the prospective teachers attended language arts lectures, seminar discussions, and demonstration lessons at the elementary school, and taught two groups of students using such techniques as word identification plans, the directed reading-thinking activity, cloze and maze passages, creative writing and bookmaking, language experience stories, learning games, and visual arts and drama. The paper describes instructional activities, assessment procedures, parent support for the program, the reflections of prospective teachers in their dialogue journals, program strengths and weaknesses (the latter including lack of support from administrators and regular classroom teachers); and goals for the program's future. (Contains 14 references.) (JDD)

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Inside an Urban Elementary School: Nurturing an Exemplary University/Public School Collaborative

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This paper presents the story of one university/public school collaborative program, including its implementation, scheduling of activities, specific instructional focus, assessment procedures, strengths, weaknesses, and future goals. The story is told from the "reality" of the university supervisors and prospective teachers involved in the project. In June, 1991, the collaboration was awarded the American Association of Higher Education's Presidents' Forum Award for Exemplary Work in Accelerating Minority Achievement.

Program Implementation: School #1

At the suggestion of the Dean of the College of Education, the University of New Orleans/New Orleans Public Schools Reading/Language Arts collaborative was established in 1986 by two university professors and a core group of teachers in an urban, elementary school. This grassroots, nonfunded project was implemented in response to a legitimate concern that many student teachers and first-year College of Education graduates from middle socioeconomic backgrounds fled the teaching profession because of urban teaching placements. They were not prepared to teach within an urban context, and could not "come to terms with . . . [the] reality of classroom life" (Hollingsworth, 1988, p. 29).

Initially, the major goals of the program were to enhance prospective teachers' abilities to teach reading and language arts to at-risk, urban students and to introduce them to an instructional context similar to one in which they would most likely be employed. In addition to pedagogical and content knowledge, effective teaching in any context requires understanding the cultural background of one's students, and the complex psycho-social aspects of the school and surrounding community. A secondary objective of the program was to provide opportunities for the

classroom teachers to observe, and if they wished, to adopt, innovative, research-based reading/language arts instructional practices.

The original project was a classic example of an informal alliance based upon personal relationships rather than institutional solidarity, and therefore could be typified as a co-operative collaborative. (Shlechty & Whitford, 1988) For example, the program received little recognition from university or school system personnel. In fact, some university professors articulated strong concerns regarding the value of the project, the safety of prospective teachers traveling to and from the urban school site, and the possibility that the prospective teachers and university instructors working in an urban environment might need "special at-risk" insurance.

Even the elementary school principal was skeptical about the benefits of the program. He accepted the collaboration reluctantly, and often complained about prospective teachers taking classroom teachers' parking spaces, too much noise when the program was in session, too many "strangers" entering the building, and too many students spending time away from their "real" lessons. He often used the school's intercom system to remind the university supervisors and prospective teachers to place students' chairs back in order and erase their lessons from the board before they left the building. The principal's negativism was further exacerbated when one prospective teacher working in the school had her car window broken and jean jacket stolen, and another prospective teacher's car was stolen when it was parked across the street from the school.

Despite minimal collegial and administrative support, the program remained at the school for three years, slowly acquiring a reputation for excellence. The elementary school children especially grew to love the program and would ask, "Are the 'UNO' coming today?" Students' parents

also became avid supporters of the project. They observed their children's growing motivation for reading and writing, although no data was systematically collected at this time which documented the students' literacy achievements. Many of the prospective teachers also recognized the benefits of the program. They agreed that program participation entailed much hard work, frustration, anxieties, and involved spending at least $200 of their own money for teaching supplies. But, quite a few were aware of how much they were learning. For example, one prospective teacher wrote in her journal, "I've learned that these kids are just like all kids. They need love, assurance, and respect just like everyone else". And, another wrote, "I now know more than any outsider would ever believe". The classroom teachers were also positive about the program. However, very few teachers questioned or adopted any of the reading/language arts strategies and approaches they observed, although the university supervisors and prospective teachers attempted to explain the lessons and invited teachers to attend demonstration lessons whenever possible.

Schedule and Activities: School #1

During the first three years (1986-1989), the first class of each semester was held on campus in order to give the prospective teachers an overview of the program, including course requirements and activities, and to provide information about the school (e.g., directions to the school site, particular customs of the school, safety precautions, teachers' names). From then on until the end of the semester, the prospective teachers and the university instructors met at the elementary school from 8:00 until 11:00 two mornings a week. Language arts lectures, seminar discussions, and demonstration lessons took place from 8:00 until 8:45. Prospective teachers then taught two different groups of students (the

same two groups) for the entire semester (Group I: 8:45-9:30 and Group II: 9:30-10:15). Three or four prospective teachers were placed in each participating classroom in order to accommodate all of the elementary students in that classroom. Thus, the participating classroom teachers were free to observe the reading/language arts lessons and interact with the groups if they wished. Reading lectures, seminar discussions and demonstration lessons were conducted from 10:15 until 11:00.

Because of the supervisors' expanding views about the importance of reflection, weekly dialogue journaling between prospective teachers and supervisors became an important component of the program curriculum. The supervisors urged the prospective teachers to reflect about their work and broader education concerns in their journals and in seminar discussions as well. They also encouraged the prospective teachers to assume increasing responsibility for devising and presenting reading/language arts lessons based upon their students' instructional needs and interests. Lessons included word identification plans, the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity, cloze and maze passages, creative writing and bookmaking, language experience stories, working with learning games created by the prospective teachers, and visual arts and drama activities.

Program Implementation: School #2

At the end of three years, the elementary school principal continued to complain about the program, and for some reason (perhaps the principal's influence), the classroom teachers had become somewhat complacent about the project. For example, they accepted the program as "a given", and lacked enthusiasm. The collaboration appeared to be stagnating. Therefore, the university supervisors made a decision to move

the project to a more receptive context. Another urban elementary school with a reputation for extreme student-centeredness was identified. The two university supervisors initiated a meeting with the principal to elicit his support. A second meeting with the principal and faculty was then scheduled in order to explain the program more fully. The principal and faculty enthusiastically welcomed the idea of a collaboration.

School #2 is located in a very old red brick, non-air conditioned building. In the spring and fall, temperatures in individual classrooms may reach 95 degrees. In 1991, the school board decided to close School #2 because of safety hazards. For example, the roof leaked considerably, and portions of the ceiling occasionally fell, narrowly missing students. Because of parental pressure, the school remained open and some minor repairs are now being accomplished. However, the roof is still in a deplorable condition.

Students in School #2 address teachers by their first names, and are allowed to walk out of classrooms without asking permission in order to use the bathroom or water fountain or to speak with the principal concerning problems they are having with their teachers or peers. The dress code is very relaxed, with some teachers wearing cut-off jeans and t-shirts. There are twelve teachers; one section of each grade level for K through 5, and two sections of each grade level for grades 6 through 8. Class sizes vary from sixteen in kindergarten to twenty-eight in each of the 8th grade sections. Most of the students in the upper grades are over-age and the majority are in need of rich literary experiences. Many receive government subsidized breakfast and lunch and live in nearby low income housing. Of the approximately 350 students, 80% are African American, 16% white, 3% Hispanic, and 1% Asian.

After three years (1989-1992), the faculty and principal continue to support the project. For example, at the end of each semester they invite

the prospective teachers and their supervisors to a "thank you" breakfast where prospective teachers receive a certificate of appreciation. Additionally, since some prospective teachers' cars were ticketed or towed away because of strict parking rules in the neighborhood surrounding School #2, prospective teachers are encouraged to park in the school's playground until the kindergarten children come out to play at 11:00 AM.

Recently, some concerns have surfaced regarding trust and open communication among program participants. For instance, during the first three years of the program, prospective teachers who needed to complete reading/language arts projects were welcome at the school anytime. However, at the beginning of the fourth year (fall, 1992), the supervisors heard rumors, which were later substantiated, that some classroom teachers wanted prospective teachers to work with students only during scheduled class meeting times. A prospective teacher also was told by the kindergarten teacher that the principal had criticized her mural as being too commercial; that is, not created entirely by students and containing some purchased materials. Further, a few newly-hired teachers, unfamiliar with the program's goals and focus, questioned the prospective teachers' teaching expertise, and the appropriateness of their group management techniques and instruction. Two of these teachers, part of a national cadre of recent college graduates who volunteer to teach in urban schools as they work toward teaching certification, may wish to drop out of the program. Because of these concerns, the supervisors and principal scheduled a half-hour, early morning meeting (8-8:30 AM) so that the prospective teachers and classroom teachers could discuss these and other issues. The meeting was extremely beneficial and, therefore, participants suggested that other meetings be scheduled. However, as was the case in School #1, most of the teachers

in School #2 have adopted very few of the reading and language arts strategies and activities they observe.

Schedule and Activities: School #2

The original program schedule has changed in some important ways. The program continues to meet two mornings a week (Monday/Wednesday), from 8:00 until 11:00. But, prospective teachers now teach only one group of students from 9:00 until 10:00 AM because of the unreasonable time and work load constraints of teaching two groups. In June, 1991, the supervisors were awarded a three-year grant to study the benefits of literature-based instruction on the language and literacy development of at-risk, urban students. Because of procedures stipulated in the grant proposal, the prospective teachers now have additional responsibilities. In addition to teaching, they also collect and analyze a portion of the data.

Instructional Activities

Because of the university supervisors' beliefs about the benefits of holistic literacy instruction, a literature-based curriculum is the focus of the program. Recent research indicates that using children's literature as the primary reading materials for literacy instruction is a significant factor in facilitating children's development of oral and written language. Literacy experiences encourage the development of language and thinking needed for school literacy and encourages standard English (Cazden, 1981; Chomsky, 1972). Since many students in today's urban public schools do not have a rich literary background prior to entering school and are often labeled "at risk", there is a greater need for many children in metropolitan areas to learn to read and write in programs that are literature-based.

At each meeting, elementary students read or listen to texts chosen to support a specified theme (i.e., K-2, fairy tales, 3-4, magic; 5-6, mystery; 7-8, time). Readings are accompanied by visuals or music designed to enhance the fiction or non-fiction read (e.g., kindergartners might hold small mirrors as they listen to the refrain, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, whose the fairest of them all" in the fairy tale, Snow White by Heins, 1974; sixth graders might listen to Vivaldi's Four Seasons as they silently read text depicting the mysteries of the seasons). The elementary students respond to the literature in a variety of ways. They create drawings and murals, write and produce plays, listen to and retell stories, and create their own books. Additionally, at each meeting the elementary students correspond with their university students in dialogue journals, and maintain a record of their independent reading by recording the date, title of the book read, and a personal comment about the literature. A typical session includes elementary students reading, rereading, talking, listening or writing about literature selections; planning, writing, or editing a story using strategic metacognitive plans titled "Find the Features and Connect Them" and "Getting to Know My Character"; entering "new" vocabulary terms and concepts in context into individual student dictionaries; and corresponding in journals. The prospective teachers also model how to use syntactic and semantic clues to predict and then confirm or rethink what might happen next in a story or how to use background knowledge and context clues to complete cloze or maze passages. In addition, teacher-directed or creative writing is an important part of every session. For example, prospective teachers may dictate sentences about stories they have read to the elementary students and then assist students to edit their spelling and punctuation, help students to paraphrase dictated sentences about familiar story characters and story settings, write along with the elementary students, stretching

sentences by adding descriptive adjectives, and collaborate with students in writing group stories and creative books. Often, the supervisors teach demonstration lessons for prospective teachers who have requested extra help with their teaching assignments.

Assessments

Assessment measures initiated last year document improvements in the elementary students' language and literacy. They include: 1) a literacy attitude survey designed to examine students' understanding/perception of the reading and writing processes (e.g., sample questions include: "What is reading?"; "How did you learn to read?"; "Why do people write?"; and "How do you know if your writing is any good?"); 2) oral story retellings designed to determine students' knowledge of story structure, and indirectly, their listening comprehension and oral language abilities (e.g., elementary students in grades K-2 heard Goldilocks and the three bears by Cauley, 1981, and then retold the story (all retellings are tape recorded and later transcribed); 3) silent reading comprehension via story frame completions for older students and picture sequencing for younger students; 4) decoding and word recognition via the "The Names Test" (Cunningham, 1990, for grades 3-8); 5) spelling development via students' informal writing and a spelling test; 6) reading vocabulary via "The Accuracy Level Test-Form B" (Carver, 1987) and; 7) written language competence via dialogue journal analysis. These assessments will be critically reviewed for each of three years in order to determine students' language and literacy progress over time.

An Evaluation of the Collaborative Program

The supervisors monitor the program continually in order to assess

strengths and weaknesses. Strengths of the program include:

1. The supervisors continue to be enthusiastic about the program. They have learned a great deal about implementing and conducting a university/public school collaborative. They recognize the extreme effort, responsibility, and professional risks involved in coordinating and supervising the program. Program participation also forces the supervisors to examine critically their own instructional orientations and practices. Working in a public school is energizing and helps to extend and stretch the supervisors' thinking and personal reflective inquiry.

2. The supervisors are well aware that the collaborative program is constantly changing and that crises will occur. When a university and public school work together, change and flux are inevitable (Trubowitz, 1986). Supervisors of successful collaboratives must anticipate, recognize, and respond quickly to problems and changes (e.g., communicate with disgruntled teachers and anxious prospective teachers, adjust course content and schedules or plan meetings with all participants, if necessary).

3. Research conducted as a result of the program has been presented at national and international conferences and published in journals. The school-based program continues to provide a fertile source of research topics. The supervisors are comfortable serving dual roles as program participants and observers/researchers.

4. The elementary principal and faculty remain fairly supportive of the program.

5. Many prospective teachers who complete the program are well aware that they have constructed the knowledge and ability to teach reading and language arts effectively to at-risk, urban students. For example, one prospective teacher wrote in her journal, "When I registered

for these classes, I had no idea what I was doing. In the beginning I felt like someone had put me in a blender and pressed the puree button. I was overwhelmed. But, it has gotten easier. All of my inhibitions have disappeared. I now know that I can handle anything. It does not matter where I will work".

The supervisors are also painfully cognizant of the program's weaknesses. For example:

1. A large percentage of the prospective teachers appear to lack the time, ability, or the willingness to think reflectively about their practices. Yet, perhaps the supervisors expect too much too soon. As one prospective teacher explained in her journal, "I wonder if we really resist reflecting about our work, or if it's that we're still in the learning stages of how to do it. It takes awhile, and a lot of work to make something so foreign become a part of someone".

2. Many prospective teachers complain about the large amount of work involved in the project. Since there is another section of these courses that does not require students to work within an elementary school (i.e., there are only 'visits' to a school in order to try out a few lessons), the differences in work load are glaring. For example, a prospective teacher wrote in her journal, "The enormous work load of this class has totally overwhelmed me, plus everyone else in the class. It is the type of class that you could spend **all** of your time on, if you were only taking it. But, alas, I am taking 17 hours this semester, plus I have three children, a husband and a house. All are on hold which is a major source of pain for me".

3. Many prospective teachers experience extreme anxieties and frustrations as they simultaneously try to learn how to manage groups of students, learn reading/language arts content, teach reading/language arts, keep up with their readings and assignments, learn to reflect about

their work, and become assimilated into the culture of an urban elementary school. Journal statements representative of prospective teachers' concerns include, "I hope you write about this and let people know just how hard a collaborative program is"; "How can I deal with all of this at one time?"; "You are just throwing things at us"; "I just want to get through this semester"; and "Discipline is my biggest problem. Each and every time I come to the classroom I hear students screaming and see them running around before I open the door. Of my 15 students, 10 are indifferent to anything I try to do".

4. Despite the supervisors' efforts to involve the classroom teachers in program planning and implementation, they remain minimally involved. Some prospective teachers wrote in their journals, "The teacher in the room is nice, but she does not work with us. She does her work while we are in the room. We never really have the opportunity to talk about our teaching experiences or concerns" and, "I have never observed the teacher working with the children. She doesn't interact at all with the students while they're in my group. She rarely observes what we do. She uses the time to catch up on other stuff. I ask her ways I can improve, but she never says anything to me".

5. There continues to be little university or public school system support for the program. If the university supervisors were not wholeheartedly involved in the project, in all probability, it would be discontinued. According to Fullan and Miles (1992), innovative school programs cannot remain innovative or grow without institutional support.

6. At this time, despite the supervisors' efforts, there is no funding available to conduct longitudinal studies to examine the developing teaching orientations and practices of the prospective teachers who participated in the collaboration, or to provide a way to include classroom teachers as more active program participants.

7. The supervisors have recently become aware that there is a lack of open communication between university and elementary school personnel.

Goals for the Program's Future

Despite the weaknesses of the collaboration, the university supervisors are confident that prospective teachers who participate in this program are more effective teachers of at-risk, urban students. They also know that the elementary students benefit from the program and that funding from the three year grant will allow for examination of their literacy development. The program is continually evolving, as most effective programs must. Their goals for the future include:

1. Obtain funding for research assistants and for follow-up longitudinal studies of prospective teachers who have completed the program.
2. Provide prospective teachers who complete the program with an extra semester hour of credit (currently they receive six hours of course credit) in order to provide some incentive for students to choose this program over one that is less demanding of their time, effort, and bank accounts (i.e., buying supplies, xeroxing).
3. Present prospective teachers in the program with a certificate of participation signed by the Dean of the College of Education, the participating principal, and the university supervisors, accompanied by a letter of explanation to share with prospective employers.
4. Provide many more opportunities for all program participants (including elementary students) to meet occasionally at the elementary school in order to share suggestions concerning program activities and to discuss concerns and problems.

5. Conduct action research projects in order to determine how best to help the prospective teachers develop habits of reflection and minimize their frustrations and anxieties.

6. Provide time (i.e., money) for the classroom teachers to attend a graduate reading/language arts class taught by the university supervisors at the elementary school site. This idea was first proposed to FIPSE in October, 1991, and has been revised and resubmitted in October, 1992.

7. Experiment with the concept of coaching by utilizing a graduate assistant to work with a classroom teacher to try and encourage adoption of the instructional strategies being used in the reading/language arts program.

8. Work toward developing mutual trust and communication among program participants. In order for collaborative programs to succeed, it is crucial that these two elements are achieved (Stoloff, 1988).

Discussion

Experts note that developing a successful collaboration program is a long, slow, developmental process (Zeitlin, Harris, Macleod & Watkins, 1992). As participants know, collaboratives are "hard work...difficult to get started...complicated to maintain [and] require nurturing and special support" (Ward, 1986, p. 7). However, most participants agree that collaboratives are worth the commitment, effort, and time involved. Sharing the specifics of collaborative programs helps others to understand what it takes to implement and participate in such partnerships.

Obviously, each collaborative is different because of participant and contextual ideosyncracies. Therefore, the factors that hinder or facilitate the development of collaborative partnerships are specific to each group of participants. Participants, as part of a group, "bring to the partnership

[their] own set of problems requiring a unique set of solutions" (Zeitlin, et. al, 1992, p. 89).

This paper has presented a candid description of **one** university/public school linkage. It is clear that many changes are still ahead in this particular collaborative effort. The supervisors know that much work is still needed. Reflecting on the collaborative experiences for purposes of writing this paper has illuminated the need for a shared agenda among participants. The university supervisors must hear classroom teachers' current perceptions about the program and help them identify personal goals for future collaborative ventures. While the classroom teachers recognize and applaud the value of the program for preservice teacher education, and many agree that their students benefit from participating in the program, most have not chosen to become committed partners. Perhaps by seeking some common questions or issues to address through the collaborative, the classroom teachers will see that they do have a voice in the partnership. For example, one common question might be, "How can we increase each child's self-esteem?" Attempting to answer this question then unites all participants toward a common goal. As Green (1992) states, we need to find common ground and seek new patterns of interaction. The story of any collaboration must be told from the view and "reality" of all program participants or it is not a true partnership.

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